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Nesting Habits of the California Shrike

Lanius ludovicianus gambeli Ridgw.

BY WM. L. ATKINSON

THE California Shrike is an abundant resident in Santa Clara, Co., Cal. where it may be seen at almost any time by an observing person, perched upon a telegraph pole or the top of some tall tree where it may have a good view of the surrounding country. A grain field containing several large white-oak or live-oak trees is a favorite locality of this bird, and once a pair has selected a location of this kind, nothing short of death will cause them to leave it. A cypress or osage orange hedge is a favored spot for a nest as is also a scrub willow in a grain field or at the roadside.

Nest building is commenced as soon as the weather moderates in the spring—some years earlier than others. My record for my first set of shrikes' eggs for the past six years is as follows:

1895, Feb. 26, six fresh eggs.

1896, Mar. 19, six fresh eggs.

1897, Apl. 1, seven fresh eggs.

1898, Mar. 9, six fresh eggs.

1899, Apl. 10, six fresh eggs.

1900, Mar. 5, six fresh eggs.

The latest date at which I have taken eggs is June 17. I believe that when unmolested the shrike raises at least three broods in a season. If the nest is robbed the birds will immediately start another one, near to and sometimes right upon the site of the old nest and in a very short time it will contain a set of eggs.

In 1894 I took one set of seven eggs, two of six each, one of five and a small boy got another of four eggs,—all from a pair of shrikes which had selected an eighty-acre field near my residence for their home. This field contained four white oak trees and one live-oak, and when one nest was collected from them they would immediately repair to the next tree and build again. In this way twenty-eight eggs were taken from

them, but undaunted they began again and in admiration for their perseverance I left them to build their *sixth* nest and hatch their eggs in peace. The next year they were on hand as usual and have ever since been yielding two or three sets yearly to swell the writer's collection.

The following is a fair record for one pair of birds for four years,—

1895, Feb. 26. Six fresh eggs.

Mar. 27. Seven eggs. Incubation advanced.

Apl. 27. Six eggs. Incubation begun.

1896, Mar. 19. Six eggs. Fresh.

Apl. 3. Five eggs. Incubation begun.

Apl. 18. Six eggs. Fresh.

May 4. Five eggs. Incubation slight.

1897, Apl. 1. Seven fresh eggs.

1898, Mar. 16. Six fresh eggs.

A total of nine sets or fifty-four eggs.

I could have taken at least one or two more sets in both 1897 and 1898 had I desired to do so—and during the same length of time the "small boy" got several sets, so it can be easily seen that the shrike is in no danger of extermination. I know that these eggs were all laid by the same pair of birds because they nested within an eighth of a mile of my residence, so that I was in a position to watch them both in the winter and summer. The eggs of this bird all show a great resemblance, as I have before noted (CONDOR 1, 29), which helps to prove the theory of individuality of eggs and also that they were all deposited by the same bird.

This year, 1900, I had quite an interesting experience with the shrike. On the 5th of March I was out collecting some specimens for skins, and while driving along a country road I noticed a suspicious looking "bunch" ten feet up

in a small cypress tree at the roadside. Driving up to the fence I stood up in my buggy in time to see a shrike flit off her nest which contained five fresh eggs. As my destination was a small stream about a mile and a half farther down the road I left the nest until I should return. Imagine my surprise when I went to collect the set to find six eggs instead of five! The female had deposited an egg while I was gone.

Desiring some specimens of the shrike for skins, I shot the female as she flew from the nest. On the 22nd of March I again drove out to the stream mentioned above and as I passed the cypress tree I saw another nest upon the same spot. Climbing up to it I was rewarded with a nice set of six eggs. The male bird had secured another mate, they had built a nest and the female laid a set of six eggs in the the short space of seventeen days! The female is a very close sitter, especially if the eggs are incubated, in some cases allowing herself to be touched before leaving the nest.

The nest is a bulky structure placed in some convenient fork of a cypress or willow or in a thick bunch of twigs near the end of a drooping oak limb, at heights varying from five to thirty feet from the ground. It is composed of an outer layer of coarse twigs, with a filling of rope, straw, string, grasses or almost any soft substance available and lined with feathers, cotton or wool, usually feathers.

The eggs range from five to seven in number, although I have taken one set of eight, and they are usually of a dull grayish ground color, although I have found some specimens showing a decidedly greenish cast. They are spotted with light brown, olive and sometimes purple, which is in most specimens heaviest at the larger end. Sixteen specimens from five different sets in the writer's collection average .96x.71. The extremes are 1.06x.71, .86x.69 and .99x.75.

I might here record a set of albino

shrike's eggs which were taken by a "small boy" near my home in 1894. Four of the seven eggs in the set were pure white, the other three being white, very sparsely spotted with a light shade of brown. I used every inducement to secure the set for my collection but they could be obtained for neither love nor money. This is the only case of albinism I have ever seen in a great many sets of shrikes' eggs examined, so I am led to believe it is quite a rare occurrence. I believe the period of incubation is fourteen days. The young are very interesting little creatures when they are just leaving the nest and it is said they make interesting pets if taken at this time and raised. Perhaps it would be well to relate an experiment along this line which I once witnessed, and which was a decided failure.

March 16th, 1900, while at work in an orchard I found two young birds just learning to fly, in a live oak tree and after an exciting chase, I succeeded in capturing them. Placing them in my lunch basket I started for home, the old birds meanwhile following me closely. Finally, the young birds became quiet in the basket and the old birds took their departure, after following me almost a mile. The same evening I took the young birds to the residence of Mr. Barlow, thinking perhaps he would like to see them alive before I skinned them. Imagine my surprise to hear him say he thought he would raise them! As they were evidently hungry he brought out some oysters and proceeded to fill them up, whereupon they immediately turned up their toes and were in due time added to our collection.

The California Shrike is a bird of very unsavory reputation, and I think from all my observations that he no doubt deserves it. His favorite past-time seems to be in catching crickets, grasshoppers, lizards, small snakes and even small birds and impaling them upon a barbed wire fence or some sharp

thorn. April 1, 1899, I found two Arkansas Goldfinches (*Astragalinus psaltria*) impaled side by side upon a barbed-wire fence, the barb in both instances being passed through the neck from side to side just at the base of the skull. [See *Oologist*, XVI. No. 5, p. 79.] I do not think they ever return to eat anything after they have once left it, and I have often thought I could detect in their actions a fiendish delight as they watched some unfortunate lizard or grasshopper squirming upon a thorn.

The note most usually heard from the shrike is a harsh call-note, but I have sometimes heard in the spring of the year a pretty little warble, with various trills, which is thought by some people to be uttered for the purpose of attracting small birds within reach, so that they may be captured. I do not agree with this theory but think their song is a sort of a "love-song," for I have watched them often while singing and never saw one try to capture a small bird or any insect at that time.

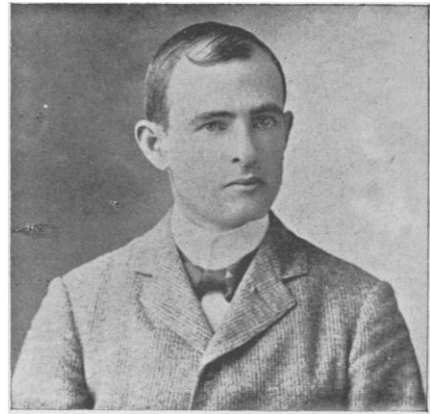


Cooper Club's President for 1901.

With the steady growth and expansion of the Cooper Ornithological Club, the executive officer of 1901 finds his position fraught with greater power and with greater possibilities than ever before, and the membership may well congratulate itself upon securing for presiding officer of the Club-at-Large one of its most popular and efficient members, Mr. Joseph Grinnell, whose likeness THE CONDOR takes pleasure in presenting.

Mr. Grinnell occupies an unique position in assuming the presidency of the Cooper Club. The Club is represented by two Divisions,—the Northern and Southern,—which separate bodies were created merely to permit of each holding meetings in its respective location. The executive power of the Club-at-Large is vested in the Northern

Division and from its membership has heretofore been chosen the president, until this year. Mr. Grinnell is temporarily a member of the Northern Division and during his year's residence at Palo Alto his ornithological work has been keenly recognized by his co-workers,



which fact, coupled with his popularity, made it evident at the time of the annual nominations that he was the unanimous choice for the presidency of the Club.

Mr. Grinnell's ornithological work in Southern California is too well-known to require repetition, and his recent publication, "Birds of the Kotzebue Sound Region, Alaska", is an example of his careful and extended field-work. His interest in the Club and its advancement has been unfaltering, and through his ability and energy we shall expect to see still better work accomplished. Mr. Emerson has relinquished the office of president after three consecutive terms of faithful service, declining to be a nominee for 1901, and the Club must feel a satisfaction in bestowing the office into the present efficient hands.



An interesting article on the nesting habits of the Buff-breasted Flycatcher, by Richard D. Lusk, for which the illustration had been prepared is laid over until our next issue, owing to the late arrival of the text.